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## Sri Lanka's Air Doctor

***Colombo's Deputy Chief Medical Officer credits USAID for learning opportunities and embarking into new areas of expertise . . .***



**When Dr. Ruwan Wijemuni, met with policy makers and bus drivers, he bluntly told them, "It's your children who are breathing in the poison coming out of the back of buses."**

Sri Lanka's "Air Doctor" Ruwan Wijemuni is in demand due to his passion for clean air. As the Deputy Chief Medical Officer for the Colombo Municipal Council, his views are sought out by policy makers, and his opinions respected by the industrial sector. Several years ago, Dr. Wijemuni recalls, that he was just an ordinary physician with no greater understanding of air quality issues than an average person. At that time, the political will to address air quality problems was less than robust just when urgent action was needed. By 2001, air quality in Sri Lanka's major cities was deteriorating rapidly, and the challenges were immense: public awareness was low, reliable scientific data was unavailable to the general public, and the industrial and transport sectors were unresponsive.

Dr. Wijemuni paints a compelling picture of Sri Lanka's air quality problems. With statistics at his fingertips, he candidly details examples of their negative health impacts. Communicating these impacts gets the attention of people who can then make a difference; but, he cautions, affecting long-term change requires the sustained involvement of all stakeholders.

USAID has played a critical role in bringing stakeholders together, Dr. Wijemuni said. Over four years, USAID has sponsored workshops and participation in technical exchanges and conferences on air quality management. Knowledge gained by stakeholders strengthened their technical capacities and exposed them to effective air quality policies in other countries. Armed with this knowledge, Dr. Wijemuni and other like-minded advocates began calling for changes to improve air quality in Sri Lanka. Their efforts led to development of the Clean Air Action Plans 2005 and 2007 and the implementation of several key initiatives.

In June 2002, the government cautiously moved toward removing lead in gasoline to reduce the lead content in the air. The results of the intervention exceeded expectations, reducing ambient lead levels in the air by 90 percent. At the same time, Dr. Wijemuni was a major champion of establishing the Sri Lanka Air Quality Index to communicate information about air quality to the public. These developments buoyed political support for cleaning up the air, and the national government promised further action.

Sri Lanka now has the capacity to move forward aggressively with other efforts to improve air quality: reliable systems to monitor air quality are in place; expertise to develop policies and standards have been engaged; and a critical mass of public support exists. Involving people most impacted by air quality like students, three wheeler drivers and bus operators, was central to affecting change to benefit future generations.

Dr. Wijemuni is now spreading the word about the value of clean air beyond Sri Lanka by contributing his time and experience to other countries through the Asia Development Bank-led Clean Air Initiative for Asia.